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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: MOSCOW MIDDLE EAST CONFERENCE IN DOUBT

REF: SECTO 1

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) Summary: Russia continues planning for a Moscow Middle East conference, despite increasing signs that the event may not take place. Russian officials have said that the GOR does not want to force any party to attend a conference and is presently waiting for a "positive sign" from Israel to convene its hoped for Annapolis follow-up. Russia is concerned by what it considers halfhearted messages from Tel Aviv that suggest Israel wants only a scaled down meeting, or even no meeting, to occur. Analysts see little to suggest that Israel will agree to the substantive conference Russia hopes for, with Tel Aviv unlikely to agree to Moscow's mediation with the Palestinians or Syrians. The GOR could, however, continue its quest for an event that would help its image as a player in international affairs. End summary.

Moscow Waiting for a "Positive Sign" from Israel  
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12. (C) MFA First Secretary Timur Zabirotov told us that the GOR had a simple message for potential participants in a Moscow Middle East conference: Russia does not want to play a leading roll in the MEPP, but simply contribute to the process by continuing the momentum begun at Annapolis. The best way for Russia to do so is to hold a conference that could bring into play its strong relationship with states in the region, particularly Syria. Russia does not want to force any party to participate in a conference and is presently waiting for a "positive sign" from Israel before moving forward.

13. (C) Zabirotov admitted that FM Lavrov's comments during the May 2 Quartet meeting on the prospects for a Moscow conference were "gloomy," but reflected Israel's "lack of clarity" as to whether it really wanted a conference convened (reftel). Putin had agreed to postpone the conference until August at Olmert's request, but the proposed timing suggested that it would not be well attended. Zabirotov pointed to a recent public statement by Israeli Ambassador Azari that Israel regarded a possible Moscow conference as "support for a Mideast settlement rather than a forum where we could hold negotiations with the Palestinians." This ran counter to the GOR vision for a substantive conference that would cover the Israel-Palestine dispute, a multilateral track that includes Syria, and issues of regional concern such as water resources.

14. (C) Israeli Emboff Michael Brodsky confirmed that the GOR told Israel it was waiting upon Tel Aviv to signal when a Moscow conference would be appropriate. This message was delivered most recently during the May 13 visit of Israeli MFA Deputy General Director Leshno-Yaar, who came to Moscow primarily to discuss bilateral issues and not the MEPP. Leshno-Yaar reportedly told the Russian press that "personally" he was "not at all sure that the conference in Moscow will go ahead."

Analysts Doubt Conference Will Occur....

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15. (C) Analysts are increasingly doubtful about the chances for a Moscow conference. Independent analyst Marianna Belenkaya told us that she was uncertain whether Moscow would host a conference, particularly after her most recent trip to the Middle East. Belenkaya was skeptical that, despite talk of progress, the Israelis and Palestinians would soon reach some sort of accommodation; if they were close, they would not want Moscow's intervention. The GOR could offer assistance with the Syrian track, especially after Olmert and Assad confirmed that the two sides had recently been in contact. But even there, Belenkaya doubted Israel would seek Russian assistance. Furthermore, she thought failure to move forward on Israel-Syria during a Moscow conference would make Russia appear diplomatically ineffective on the one issue it claimed the ability to play a "special role."

16. (U) Analysts writing in the Russian press have pointed to Egypt's plan to hold an "alternative" conference (to which Russia was not invited) while President Bush visited the Middle East as further evidence that a Moscow meeting would not occur. Several have written that Russia wants to make a real contribution to the MEPP and would not hold a Moscow conference simply for the "sake of appearances" if it appeared doubtful anything would be accomplished.

....But Moscow Could Go Ahead Anyway

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17. (C) However, since the Moscow conference has been viewed

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as a measure of Russia's return to Middle East politics, the GOR will not relinquish the initiative easily. Middle East expert Georgiy Mirskiy of the Institute of Higher Economics even argued that the GOR would continue to call for a Moscow conference despite the fact that it might not have a positive result. Mirskiy doubted the GOR could help reach a comprehensive settlement by holding a ME conference that was largely intended to demonstrate for a domestic audience that Russia maintained a significant role in international affairs. The act of convening an Annapolis-type conference in Moscow was the real goal of the Russian leadership, who felt confident that they could "explain away" any failure to move the peace process forward by pointing to the intractability of the issues facing the ME. Should there be any progress, particularly on the Israel-Syria track, the GOR could claim the credit.

RUSSELL